

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL**

**ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOWELL, MA:
MAKING, REMAKING, AND REMAKING AGAIN**

**INFORMANT: BLONG XIONG [LAOS]
INTERVIEWER: CHRISTOPH STROBEL
DATE: MARCH 15, 2008**

**B = BLONG
C = CHRISTOPH**

Tape 08.24

B: My name is Blong Xiong and I live on Ralph Street in Lowell.

C: That's in the Lowell Highlands, right?

B: Yes, the Highlands.

C: You're from Laos?

B: Laos, yes.

C: Where specifically in Laos?

B: From many places in Laos because I had to move from place to place for the war. I was born in northern Laos, a province called Xieng Khouang, where I lived until I was about six years old. Until the war broke out in 1957-58, then we moved to a safe place in the middle of the country. And then we lived in the city where the headquarters of the division that protected northern Laos were stationed. We were there for quite a while until 1973-75. Then the Communists took over and we moved again.

C: So how did you end up coming to the United States and Lowell as well?

B: Well, as I said, because of the war... at that time I worked with a U.S. agency, USAID. I worked in the hospital. So, I had connections... I lived in a Communist country... and also especially because I'm a minority....

C: Which minority do you belong to?

B: Hmong.

C: That's what I thought, but I didn't want to assume. So, were you able to get a visa, were you able to get a visa through your connections?

B: I got a visa yes.

C: Did you come to Lowell immediately or did you go someplace else first?

B: I first came to Virginia, Washington D.C. because my cousin, he came before us and then he sponsored me at that time.

C: Why, in the end, did you decide to come to Lowell?

B: I had been in the Washington D.C. area for three years. After that my family came, my wife and my four children. We were reunited also with her half-sister who came to Lowell first in 1980. They live in Florida now.... In 1985-6 in Lowell the immigration rules, the jobs – companies were saying, "Come over, lots of jobs, you can work in our company."

C: Was that with the Wang boom?

B: Yes, the Wang boom, the manufacturing and technology boom.

C: So that was attractive to you, employment? Were you also attracted because...

B: Of her sister...

C: Yeah....were there a lot of Lao living in Lowell at the time?

B: Yes, I'm not positively sure, but at the time about 10,000 people.

C: Okay, so that was certainly a factor there, too. Do you know how large the Lao community is in Lowell now?

B: Right now around two-three thousand because a lot have moved to the South.

C: So they've moved to the South and also to the suburbs, because I know some Lao who used to live in Lowell and now they live in Groton and all over the place. Let's maybe move a little bit and talk about your life in Lowell. How long have you lived at your current residence in Lowell?

B: Since 1986, about 22-23 years.

C: Wow, that's a long time. Are there a lot of Lao where you live? Do you have Lao or Southeast Asian neighbors where you live?

B: I have a Southeast Asian neighbor and a Hispanic neighbor. There are a couple of Caucasian neighbors and a Greek neighbor.

C: Are there certain Lao businesses that you go to in town, like Phien's Kitchen that is a Lao restaurant on Westford or are there Lao stores that you go to, or do you basically go to Market Basket or Southeast Asian markets in general?

B: Yes, I don't go to a specialty store.... I go wherever I feel like, the Southeast Asian market, Market Basket, Hannaford Foods... I go to those places.

C: Do the Lao people in Lowell live in mostly one place or are they scattered all over the city?

B: Kind of scattered all over the city.

C: The reason why I'm asking these questions is because the Park also wants to learn a little more about neighborhoods, because historically immigrants have supposedly been more neighborhood oriented. Some people say that's still the case, other people say, "No, it's more spread out." So that's what we're trying to find out and why I'm asking these questions about neighborhood a lot.

B: If we could do what we would like to, we would all live next to each other, but we can't. Financially or whatever... you can't just say, "Buy a house here." No, you can't do that. So we are spread out, but we still have a connection, visit, calling...always like that we connect with each other.

C: So you have a lot of friends and acquaintances in the city that you're in contact with?

B: Yes.

C: Do you meet frequently at each other's houses?

B: If we don't have something special we don't get together, but we call and might meet each other in the store, something like that.

C: So you said you were married and have four children, are your children all still living in Lowell?

B: Yes, they are in Lowell.

C: Do they go to school? Do they work?

B: Right now they work. My youngest daughter is 28 and my older one is 34 already.

C: What kind of careers?

B: Well, my children, they are lab workers.

C: Your parents or your wife's parents, are they still in Laos?

B: My wife's mother is still in Laos. Her father also came here, but passed years ago. My father served in the army, but he survived and moved here. He also passed away, in early 1996.

C: There are big Hmong communities in Minnesota and in California, I think around Fresno. Do you have contacts with people in those parts of the country at all?

B: I don't in California, but I do in Minnesota. I have family there, my brother and my sisters are out there and my cousins are there.

C: Is that true for other members of the Lao community as well, that they have relatives in California or Minnesota or other places?

B: Yes.

C: Is there a lot of interaction going on there? Do people talk and go visit?

B: Yes, in our culture we always do that...talk, visit, and contact each other. To make sure everyone's OK.

C: Do you do that by telephone? Internet? Or just by driving to see people?

B: For my generation it's mostly telephone and that's all. My children's generation and my grandchildren's generation they all e-mail.

C: Have you been able to go to Laos at all since you've gotten to the United States or was that not possible?

B: It was possible for me. I went back twice, once in 1989 and early 2007.

C: Was it weird to go back?

B: Yes. It had changed so much and I was a stranger to them, totally somebody else.

C: Do you feel like living in America has totally changed you?

B: They look at me as not-Lao anymore.

C: So they look at you as American?

B: Yes.

C: How do you look at yourself? Do you look at yourself as Lao American or American?

B: I look at myself as Lao American.

C: Is that because you feel part American, but also part Lao?

B: Yes, that's true, because where I come from, where I was born, and the way I look, I can't say I'm American!

C: Do you sometimes feel, in the city, that you get put in a box because of the way you look, that people judge you differently?

B: I always felt that. Generally I feel proud to be an American, but if you go deeper inside I still suffer from that.

C: Have there been moments where you felt deliberately discriminated against because you're Lao American or Southeast Asian American or does it work on a more hidden level? Do you know what I'm saying?

B: Yes. A hidden level... generally Asians and colored people and Hispanics... I can say we are a minority.

C: Can you give me a specific example when you experienced something of that sort?

B: The way you apply for a job. Or you go to a big meeting with all kinds of people and you still feel like you're just the outsider.

C: No, I understand and I hear that a lot. Have you taught your children about Hmong culture and language? About Lao culture and language? Is this something that is important to you and your wife?

B: It is very important to us... I've tried to... but I didn't do much and I didn't do a good job. My children don't even speak Hmong? But they speak Lao, their mother's language. But now my grandchildren not one of them speaks Lao. They only speak English. That's partly my fault I didn't do a good job.

C: I also think that's normal, that pattern that you're talking about. It happens in just about all communities. It's hard to teach your children, because I imagine you had to work very hard.... What kind of jobs did you have and how much work did you do since you came to the U.S.?

B: Are you talking the present time?

C: The present time and the last twenty some years!

B: Okay, that's a good story too. When I first landed in the United States... I landed a job as a dishwasher in Washington D.C., and I washed dishes for six months. Then my cousin took me to work – hotel maintenance in Washington D.C. I did that probably for a year. Then I turned to work in the suburbs in building maintenance. I think I got paid \$4.75 an hour. It was 1983. Then I moved to hotel maintenance and got around \$7 per hour. Then I moved to the suburbs in building maintenance again and got \$10 per hour. After that I moved to Lowell. When I moved to Lowell I was still working in hotel maintenance, in downtown Lowell, at the Lowell Hilton. I worked there four years and got almost \$8 per hour. At the time I had two jobs. That job was from 4pm until midnight. In the morning I worked in medical technology, on a medical assembly line in Billerica. I guess I made \$4.75 per hour at that time.

C: So you worked basically two jobs to support your family?

B: Yes. After four years I left the hotel and I kept the assembly job because I kept getting education and worked my way up to technician and got about \$20 per hour. Since then I have changed from company to company, but it's still medical assembly, in the research and development department.

C: So you still work there as a technician now?

B: As I said earlier, I have no education, only a GED and I get \$35 per hour, I'm not complaining.

C: But sometimes experience is what matters. You can learn some in school, but experience is important too. That's a very interesting story. You are also very active in the Lowell community, because Susan Thompson knew about you and I've been hearing your name around town a lot. What do you do in the Lao community and how does this fit with the Lao community in general?

B: I've been involved for quite a while since 1990. I serve as a board member of the Laos community. I've been the vice president of the community organization. I serve as the ethnic immigration commissioner appointed by the city manager...[Recording becomes inaudible: Blong speaks of work with non-profits and the family work center]...I can also say I'm the co-founder of the Lowell Water Festival, myself and Samkhann [Khoeun]. Not just the two of us there were about ten people at the first meeting....

C: So is the water festival also very important to the Lao community?

B: Yes, very important.

C: Do you also go to the Lao Temple in south Lowell? There's also one in Westford, are you involved?

B: I'm not really involved, but my family, they kinda go, but I'm Christian. So, I can go, but I don't do anything much.

C: So for the Lao New Year you might go there?

B: Yeah, I go for that.

C: Do you go to Christian church?

B: I am a Christian, but I'm not proud because I'm not very active because I'm so busy. If I have time then I will go otherwise I don't go.

C: Well, I think a lot of Christians are like that. Do you go to a specific church?

B: Yes, I am Mormon.

C: Is it Princeton Boulevard where the church is?

B: Yes.

C: So, you went to Laos twice. Have you had people come from Laos to visit you here in the United States?

B: Yes.

C: How often does that happen?

B: Not often, but back then a lot, they came back and forth, back and forth, but right now it's kind of difficult.

C: Why is it difficult, because it's hard to get visas?

B: Yes, it's hard to get visas. After 9/11 it's very tough.

C: Okay, so this is more about the U.S. government and not the Lao government?

B: No, just the United States.

C: So what's the fear?

B: People from Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand come and don't want to go back, they stay over.

C: Okay, so there's a fear about illegal immigration...When people came to visit from Laos did you take them to visit places?

B: Yes.

C: What kinds of places did you go to?

B: New York, Washington D.C., Minnesota, California, Florida, wherever they had friends and family.

C: Did you do stuff locally with them as well, like take them to downtown Lowell or to Boston?

B: Oh yeah.

C: Do you also take them to the National Park at all?

B: No, no.

C: Because part of the purpose of the study too is that the Park is trying to find ways to reach out to new immigrants. To attract newer immigrants to go to the Park, but also to make exhibits about say the Lao in Lowell, etc. Would that be something that you would be interested in seeing?

B: I would like to see the community I have connections with see represented. Because my personal feeling is that I'm a part of Lowell, I belong to Lowell, and everything in Lowell belongs to me.

C: It looks like you've lived in the city for a long time and your children live in the city too. What do you think the Park could do to reach out to the Lao community, do you feel there's an outreach by the Park to the Lao community?

B: In the past, I haven't seen anybody from the Park come to the Lao community, probably because they are so busy, they don't have funding, not enough funding. But if possible, in the future, have people come over to the Lao community. Probably if they could make connections and gain trust and relate with each other, they would say, "Oh yeah, the Lao minority community here is part of the history of the Park."

C: To shift a little bit and talk about power and politics in Lowell, who do you think has the power in the city? What ethnic group? In other words, do feel there is adequate political representation for Lao, Cambodian, Hispanics, etc. in the city?

B: I think the Greek have more power, the second would be the Cambodian, and then the Hispanic, but the top one absolutely is the white people.

C: So like Irish, French Canadian? Would you like to see a Lao city councilman in the future?

B: I would love to see that!

C: Do you think it will happen in your lifetime?

B: Well, I'm not sure because right now I don't see anybody who can do that, because the young generation, they don't think about that because they are educated here. My generation wanted to that, but our education does not qualify us. The language, the knowledge, the law....

C: Have you experienced any tensions, or have you noticed any tensions between different minority groups, like that the Cambodians and the Lao don't get along or that there's pressure from the Vietnamese? Or that there are pressures between Southeast Asians and Hispanics? Do you see that happening at all?

B: It always happens, but I don't think it's major. Personally I try to live friendly, peacefully, but there's always something there. I am not an angry man, I don't want to fight, and I'm really very, very concerned about the gangs of the Cambodian, the Hispanics and the Lao. I would like to see the city government do something about that so they will live in peace.

C: So do you notice a lot of gang violence?

B: Right now it's kind of quiet, because I think the police are doing a good job, but it's not good enough. I would like to see them put those gangs out for good. The police know who they are.

C: What do you think the police could do about these issues?

B: Well they know who they are, but they just let it go.

C: Do you think that maybe talking to people and getting gang members from different communities together and have them talk things over, could that be good?

B: Could be good, there is supposed to be peace in this country.

C: Do you feel there are a lot of Lao gangs, or Cambodian gangs, or is it getting better?

B: It's not getting better, it's not getting worse, I don't know for sure, the police would know.

C: Why do you think the kids end up joining these gangs? It's a tough question, but from your perspective in the community....

B: They come from families where the parents are financially in trouble....also education, society.... I think the school system here, from kindergarten to twelve, if they taught what they teach in our country, how to be men, how to be respect, not to do bad things...we would call them family values, right? Teach religion in school.... There is too much freedom... students talk back at teachers... not in our country. Because what we teach our children is that the teacher is their second parent. Your parents give you life, but your teacher gives you a future. You are to respect them and listen to them.

C: Do you think that there's a problem between the generations sometimes?

B: That's most of the problem. Their life here is different. Right now I can't even talk to my grandchildren. Whatever your parents and grandparents say to you, you are supposed to say, "Yes, grandmother, yes grandfather." Here they say, "I can't do it, I don't want to do it, I hate you." Now this is totally wrong. And it shocked me. I cannot depend on them. In our country

when you get old you can depend on your children to take care of you. Here, forget it! Right now they go away, they forget, they just want you to die when you get old.

C: Is there any question that I didn't ask you that you would have liked to have been asked, or thought I should ask?

B: No, I can't think of any.

C: Well, thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.